

Speech at the Inauguration of the Ontario Centre for Inquiry: Toronto, March 10, 2007

Dear Fellow-Secularist-Humanist-Freethinkers:

I've come all the way from Ottawa to support whole-heartedly the creation of the first chapter of the **Centre for Inquiry** in Canada. Compared to the tortuous road I had to travel from Roman Catholicism in my childhood to atheistic agnosticism by the time I reached adulthood, my drive here today was a cinch. It took painful years for me to recover from the effects of the insidious indoctrination and emotional abuse to which I was subjected as a child. Most of today's children suffer the same abuse, reinforced by subtle, and often not so subtle, forms of manipulation throughout our society. I know the CFI will be a powerful ally in the fight against moral and intellectual totalitarianism.

I find it entirely appropriate that the first chapter of the **CFI** is being established in Ontario because our province seems to be particularly redolent of religious bigotry. We still have, for instance, a publicly funded Catholic school system which Quebec and Newfoundland abandoned. Religious schools make a mockery of education. They deny young minds the right of free inquiry and instead indoctrinate them in superstitious dogma. About twenty years ago, the International Human Rights Court in Geneva found the Ontario provincial government guilty of human rights violations on account of its funding Catholic schools, but still the discriminatory system continues to operate.

Alberta boasts Jewish, Sikh and Hindu publicly funded schools in addition to the Catholic system. Unless we put a stop to this development, we'll end up with schools of every religious bull and bluster – Buddhist, Mormon, Shiite, Shinto, Born-again of every stripe – all bombarding young minds with their fantasies and fallacies and in the process dividing our nation against itself until we too are ripe for the same sectarian slaughter that marks the history of religions everywhere. Religious indoctrination is child abuse, and both the children and we adults pay a high price for it.

Late last summer, a group of secular humanists in Ottawa incorporated an organization called **Secular Ontario**. We were motivated by the conviction that for people in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society to live in harmony with each other it is essential that the affairs of church and state be kept scrupulously separate, and that no religion or ideology be officially privileged, funded, or promoted.

We took as our first target municipal councils that open their meetings with "the Lord's Prayer". The practice was declared illegal by the Ontario Court of Appeal in 1999, yet it persists. In November we wrote to 18 councils suggesting that it behooved

government officials to abide by the law, that not doing so set a poor example for the young, and that opening an official meeting with a Christian prayer was demeaning to people of other faiths and convictions.

We were not so naïve as to expect the councils to thank us for interfering with the exercise of their religious prejudices, but we were not prepared for the hornet's nest we frenzied. To this day, 15 of the councils haven't replied to us, but they buzzed the media, denouncing us as morons, and vowed to continue to break the law, inviting us to "go back where we came from" if we didn't like it.

Racism grounded in religion. It produced a flood of hate mail. The brunt of the aggression was directed at me – "howling mad Beissel" according to **The National Post** – since as president of **Secular Ontario** I had signed the official letters. I was interviewed extensively on radio, TV, and the print media. An innate respect for language and for the ordinary decencies of civil discourse prevents me from quoting some of the more obscene invective hurled at me via email. Fortunately, I don't scare, but I am troubled to see how close the lynch mob mindset is to the smiling surface of Christian neighbourly love.

The good thing about our campaign is the strong support we have received on radio, TV and via email. Invariably it comes from more literate, articulate, and educated voices. They call for an end to religious discrimination in our country, for bibles to disappear from courtrooms and hotel rooms, for prayer rooms to disappear from legislatures, for an end to tax breaks granted religious organizations and charities that use their services to actively promote their faith – in other words, for an end to the prevailing culture in which non-believers are second-class citizens whose convictions deserve none of the respect accorded to the mainstream faiths as a matter of course.

According to the latest polls, 20% of Canadians admit to having no religion. The real number is likely much higher. When I explained to John Wilson, host of radio talk-show 'Focus 980' in London, our need to leave religion behind if our species is to survive the current global crisis, he cried out enthusiastically – on the air! – "I'm 150% on your side!" Times are changing, and the force of history is on our side.

It is time for secularists, humanists, agnostics, atheists, skeptics and free thinkers to come out of the closet and join us in the struggle for a secular world in which social justice prevails, a world without superstitious mumbo-jumbo where all people can live in freedom and with dignity. I know that **CFI Ontario** will help focus and marshal the forces committed to this vision of the only viable future for humankind.

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Henry Beissel (hebe@rogers.com)